

*Men in Medieval Feminism*

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At the second national Women's Liberation Movement conference at Skegness (England) in 1971 men were excluded from the platform but included in the audience. A fist fight broke out on the platform and a man rushed forward to "rescue" his wife. Men were then confined to the closing disco... The following year, at Manchester, there was another punch-up, this time between a man and a woman at the disco. After that men were voted out entirely. The historical place of men in feminism (or feminist newsletters) is subject to continuous renegotiation...

Men in the feminist audience can be a real pain. If they talk they talk too much and at the wrong times. If they remain silent their silence itself can (especially in their own minds) become burdensome, a ponderous insistence upon the dignity of an essentialist separation... If they retreat to the back of the room they tend to talk among themselves, *sotto voce*, and the main meeting becomes another male spectator sport.

So what moves men to concern themselves with feminism? Many pious formulas come to mind. But perhaps the only arguments to be trusted are historical ones, that is, personal ones. Take me, for example. I arrived at Texas fully credentialized (Ph.D. Cantab) to teach my research interest: the late medieval insect. Texas, I thought, was an ideal place for this: it has the biggest cockroaches in the world. But from the first it was obvious that some people had other interests. A historical crossroads had arrived: either I asked questions and did the background reading to make sense of the feminist papers, or I dismissed them with the standard formula: these papers are interesting but they tell me *nothing* about the medieval insect...

Identity, that is, is formed historically, dialectally. Feminism is a historical force that continually interrogates our choice of "research interest" and so challenges, has a share in, that identity.

So farewell, old insect...

Shulamith Shahar has observed that "there has never been a book about 'the History of men in the Middle Ages,' nor is it likely that there ever will be one." Shahar is making the point that all medieval history has been written as the history of men; the genus cannot be distinguished from the universal. But as the history of medieval women continues to be written, the *particular* character of medieval masculine experience will continue to be differentiated. Only through feminism, and in a sense *after* feminism, will the history of medieval men be written. For such reasons of enlightened self-interest, then, men should resist the current attempt (as at my university) to draw feminist programs back



into "gender studies," another name for the business-as-usual, masculine universalism Shahar alludes to.

Some progress has been made. In some medieval texts (not all), masculine celibates contemplate a masculine God who created a masculine creature without female participation. Even some men in my department see that this is a bit weird; this may not be the whole story.

## REVIEWS

*Hrotsvit of Gandersheim: Rara Avis in Saxonia?* Katharina M. Wilson, ed.  
Medieval and Renaissance Monograph Series, Vol. 7. Ann Arbor: Marc Publishing Co., 1987. \$14.95

The works of Hrotsvit--drama, hagiography, history, epic--are by one of the medieval women writers who has "canonical" status in a masculinist literary canon. Yet her works are seldom read, primarily because they are in Latin, and few exist in accessible modern translations. Modern readers have unjustly denigrated the tenth century as a humanistic wasteland inhabited only by the rare talent of the seldom-read Hrotsvit. Those who appreciate both the works of Hrotsvit and those of other tenth-century writers, however, may hope that renewed attention to Hrotsvit will revive interest in other neglected authors.

This anthology of essays, most of which "were presented...at Kalamazoo in 1985 and 1986" (xiv), has two avowed aims. It wishes to illuminate Hrotsvit's unquestionably great talent and show her, in Katherine Wilson's words, "as a skillful artist of the Ottonian Renaissance" (xiii). In so doing, it demonstrates that earlier scholarly impressions of the tenth century were ill-conceived.

The anthology contains nineteen essays. The first two, which introduce Section I, "Hrotsvit and the Past: The Intellectual Heritage," discuss the literary (especially the hagiographic) and philosophical background to Hrotsvit's work. The second essay, Suzanne F. Wemple's "Monastic Life of Women from the Merovingians to the Ottonians," may be especially interesting to feminist scholars because it discusses such subjects as continental double monasteries under female rule that contributed to the autonomy of women and nourished talents like Hrotsvit's. The remaining six essays discuss the influence of Terence, Augustine, and Boethius on Hrotsvit's literary artistry as well as her debts to musical, mathematical, and aesthetic theories contemporary with her.

Section II, "Hrotsvit and the Present: The Tenth-Century Context," comprises seven essays that demonstrate the context within which Hrotsvit